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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001055

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: RULING PARTY CANDIDATE WINS COMMANDING PLURALITY
IN SPECIAL ELECTION, AMID MUTTERS OF VOTE-BUYING

REF: A. YEREVAN 1049

[1](#)B. YEREVAN 984

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Classified By: DCM Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Polling and vote tabulation proceeded fairly smoothly during the August 26 special election for the district 15 parliamentary seat. The Republican candidate was declared the winner with about 46 percent. His formerly-Prosperous Armenia rival came in second with almost 29 percent. The Dashnak came in third with about 21 percent, while Heritage Party leader Raffi Hovannisian took a distant fourth place, with less than 4 percent. The only accredited observers, the U.S.-funded "It's Your Choice" (IYC) NGO, documented few serious irregularities with the voting or tabulation, but privately gave credence to widespread local rumors of pre-election day vote-buying. Our own, limited, observation found significant cynicism about the race and circumstantial indications that not all was right, but there seems to be no concrete evidence on which we could build a case for criticism. No formal complaint had been filed with the CEC by the 2:00 pm August 27 deadline. END SUMMARY.

THE RESULTS

[1](#)2. (U) With a voter turnout of over 60%, the Central Election Commission (CEC) announced its preliminary results: Republican Khachik Manukyan won with 16,121 votes (46%). Talin mayor (and former Prosperous Armenia candidate) Mnatsakan Mnatsakanyan came in second with 10,067 (28%). ARF (Dashnak) candidate Gurgen Shihanyan came in third with 7,248 (20%), and Heritage Party leader Raffi Hovannisian was fourth with just 1,220 votes (3%). IYC observers had collected certified copies of each precinct's final tabulation protocols and plans its own parallel count based on this data, but at a quick review these protocols seem to track with the aggregate numbers announced by the CEC.

WAS THE FIX IN?

[1](#)3. (C) Poloffs ventured out among the 84 polling stations in District 15 on Election Day to see for themselves what was going through the minds of those involved in a contest pitting rivals Khachik Manukyan and Mnatsakan Mnatsakanyan,

who had been neck-and-neck in May's poll, with the increasingly popular opposition figure Raffi Hovannisian. Lacking accreditation to enter polling places, poloffs spoke with voters, party proxies, and observers outside of polling stations. DCM, meanwhile, accepted the CEC chairman's invitation to accompany him on a general tour of polling stations. We found voting in the majority of precincts proceeding in an orderly manner, though we also witnessed a handful of vigorous arguments between party proxies and election officials.

¶4. (C) Hovanissian's Heritage Party had campaigned intensively throughout the district in the preceding weeks, seemingly meeting with voter receptivity. The majority of average voters we spoke with affirmed that election day proceedings were "normal," though we detected a distinct undercurrent of cynicism from our interlocutors. One of the more outspoken voters we met said "whoever pays the most will win!" to the nervous laughter of his compatriots. Elsewhere, an elderly lady declared adamantly that she would be voting for Hovannisian to bring some change to the country, but admitted that her vote "would not count." She cursed the Republican candidate, whom she eyed at the far end of the square.

¶5. (C) Heritage Party representatives we met on election day consistently alleged massive irregularities, especially focusing on the claim that the Republican candidate had paid off thousands of voters before election day. There were also numerous allegations -- from Heritage, IYC, and in one place the Dashnaks -- of widespread inappropriate "helping" of elderly voters to mark their ballots. IYC documented a number of infractions commonly seen in former Soviet countries, such as inadequate privacy in voters' booths, families voting together, and excessive crowding in some polling places. Notable though, was IYC's overall assessment that these irregularities did not seriously affect the outcome of the voting, which IYC deemed to be generally

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smooth.

¶6. (C) IYC leaders volunteered to us privately, however, their belief that although voting day processes went fairly smoothly, major vote-buying had taken place before election day. This, they argued, would explain the seemingly sharp discrepancy between Hovanissian's seeming popularity and his very low vote count. The IYC experts, deeply experienced in Armenian elections, said that once Armenian voters are bribed, they believe that, despite the secret ballot, the authorities will somehow find out if they fail to vote for the candidate they have been paid to support.

¶7. (U) The Heritage Party released the following statement from Raffi Hovanissian after the results were announced: "The election process was fundamentally unfree and unfair, with a variety of government levers and resources being applied to voters in inappropriate and often unlawful fashion. Hopefully, Armenia's leaders will discharge their responsibilities with greater integrity and legality in the future. In the interim, I congratulate Mr. Manukian and wish him well in the service of his constituents from the 15th district."

LOCAL CONTEXT OFFERS MORE FOOD FOR THOUGHT

¶8. (SBU) In many of the towns and villages we visited, gaggles of old men lined the benches outside polling places and were willing to talk openly about the election and the political process in Armenia. In Manukyan's home village of Mastara, men spoke fondly of how their home-grown candidate had built himself up from nothing and deserved their vote. But when asked about Raffi Hovannisian's candidacy, no one with whom we spoke had anything but praise for the Heritage

Party chairman. One voter in Mastara complained that Hovannisian had chosen the wrong election in which to run, and suggested that he should run for president. When we then asked the assembled group about a hypothetical run by Hovannisian for the country's highest office, many raised their hands in glee at such a prospect. Many others in the places we visited throughout the course of the day shared that sentiment.

¶9. (SBU) Emboffs saw some telltale signs that political party apparatchiks and thugs were present at some polling places. We saw a black Mercedes without license plates moving about the district along with various black BMWs filled with bulky men clad in black leather jackets. Despite the claim that the Prosperous Armenia (PA) party was unable to support its former candidate Mnatsakan Mnatsakanyan because of its coalition agreement with the Republicans, we spotted several cars in the larger villages bearing the PA logo and sporting license plates that clearly identified their affiliation with Prosperous Armenia's chairman, Gagik Tsarukian.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) We were frankly startled to see Hovanissian's vote count come in so low, especially when there was so little detectable fraud. It may be, as the CEC Chairman postulated to DCM, that Hovanissian miscalculated in attempting to nationalize what was perceived as a local race, and voters preferred local figures who were better known to them. However, we also find plausible, though it is impossible to measure or verify, the allegation that many voters were bribed to support the Republican candidate. Voters continue to have very low confidence in the integrity of elections here, and we suspect they know whereof they speak.

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